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CH'AN NEWS LETTER

No. 110 September 1995

Teacher-Advisor
(Shih-fu) Venerable
Master Sheng-yen

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Biography of a Chinese Monk

A talk by Master Sheng-yen, given at the University of Michigan on November 10, 1989, and edited by Linda Peer and Harry Miller.

Tonight I will describe the daily life and training I experienced in the Ch'an monasteries of my youth and early adulthood, and then I'll talk about my personal approach to Ch'an training.

Before the Chinese revolution, when I "left home" (in Chinese, a monk or nun is called a "left-home person"), there were many Buddhist monasteries in China, but few of them had a Ch'an Hall and a regular program of Ch'an training. There were perhaps five or six well-known monasteries where a monk could receive training in Ch'an. They included Ching Shen, Yang Chou Gao-ning Ssu, and Yu Fo Ssu in Shanghai. In Chang Chou there was Tian Ling Ssu, in Hunan there was Nan Yueh Ssu and in Kuang-tong, or Canton, there was Nan Hua Ssu, the training monastery established by the 6th Patriarch, Hui-neng, (638-713). Yun Chu Ssu was in Chiang Xi, and there were the two monasteries which were revived by Master Hsu Yun (Empty Cloud, 1840- 1959). My basic teacher and most important master was Tung Chu, of Ting Hui Ssu on Wu tai Shan's Kuan Chi Mountain.

All Ch'an monasteries were governed by similar rules, and the daily life of the monks was very much the same. Two kinds of training were employed. The first related to daily life. The greatest importance was placed upon carrying out monastic duties, but training in daily life also included rituals of worship or veneration at prescribed times of the day, as well as daily meditation.

The second kind of cultivation was the intensive training during Ch'an retreats. The shortest meditation retreats were a week long, and there were also retreats of 21 days, 49 days and 3 months. The shorter retreats might be held in any of the Ch'an monasteries around China, using the staff of that monastery. For longer retreats a local monastery would invite an eminent Ch'an Master to preside. This would generally be an abbot or the head of the Ch'an Hall from one of the great monasteries. The two most famous Ch'an Masters of that time were Master Hsu Yun (Empty Cloud) and Master Lai-kao.

In the large monasteries where Ch'an training was available, there were generally two three-month retreats each year, in summer and winter. Winters were too cold to travel or meditate in the mountains, so winter was a good time for group meditation. In summer it is too hot to work, so summer, too, was set aside for meditation. This summer and winter practice taught us not to be bothered by heat or cold.

There was a couplet inscribed at the entrance to every Ch'an Hall which said that when you enter you give up your body to the routine

of the Ch'an Hall and your life to the Dharma Protector Deities. This meant that you should have no concern for your body or your life. You had to give yourself completely to the practice of Ch'an.

The head of Ch'an Hall told monks who came for retreat that if they got sick no one would care for them, and if they died their bodies would be stuffed under the meditation platform and cremated after the retreat ended. The head of the meditation hall meant that the monks had to let go of all of their expectations and drop all of their attachments. Only under these conditions could they practice well.

We ate and slept in the meditation hall during retreats. You might think that there would have been someone to give us instruction before the retreat. After all, we would live in the Ch'an Hall for some time. You might think we monks would need to know the daily schedule and rules, as well as why and how to practice. However, there was no explanation whatsoever. We were simply expected to do what everybody else did. I just followed the routine; eating, doing sitting and walking meditation, sleeping, etc. No one even told us the rules of the meditation hall, and if you asked how to practice very often you were hit with the incense board (the stick used in the meditation hall for waking sleeping monks, relieving tension, giving signals, etc.)

Once I asked the Master, "How long do we have to go through this?" and he said, "Until the year of the deer." There's no such thing as the year of the deer in the Chinese calendar. He was saying that we had to follow the routine forever. We were not supposed to seek explanations. I was somewhat distressed by this. It seemed like blind practice. But it was typical of the training in the monasteries of that time. Monks continued this "blind" practice for years, and gradually their characters and dispositions changed as a result.

During retreats, there were short Dharma lectures in which practice was discussed. Encounters with or questions of the Ch'an Master were not a regular feature of practice. If something unusual happened; if you had a meditative experience which seemed important or an enlightenment experience, you could approach the head of the meditation hall. He questioned and tested you, and at his discretion

you might be sent to see the Master.

A monk who was given permission to enter the Master's quarters to question him was recognized as a "disciple who is allowed to enter the Master's room." This signified that the monk had an initial awakening or was very close to an awakening. Most monks didn't ever get to enter the Master's quarters. I never entered the Master's room while I was in mainland China.

These were the conditions I saw in Ch'an monasteries when I was young. In 1949, when I was 19, I moved to Taiwan. I continued to ask myself, "Is this all there is to practice? Am I ever going to learn more? Am I ever going to meet a liberated Ch'an Master and find the solution to my problems?"

Once in Taiwan I asked an eminent Master "How should I practice? what should I do?" The Master replied, "Practice! What are you talking about? What do you mean, 'practice'?" This is it. Just practice what you've been doing day after day." I felt that this was going to be the rest of my life.

I would think about Buddhist stories I had heard, such as the story of Hui Neng, who became the 6th Patriarch of Ch'an. Hui Neng was an ordinary wood cutter. One day he heard one line from the *Diamond Sutra* and grasped it completely. He immediately attained enlightenment without any previous Buddhist practice or study. I had also heard stories of people who attained arhatship or other levels of enlightenment simply by seeing, meeting or speaking with the Buddha. Sometimes the Buddha would just say one thing, such as, "Ah, you've finally come!" and the one to whom he spoke achieved arhatship. I felt that my karmic obstructions were heavy, and I despaired of ever seeing the Buddhas or encountering a liberated teacher.

I had many questions and many doubts. I thought, "I'm not stupid. Is it really possible that no one can help me understand how to practice?" But everyone I asked told me, "Your karmic capacity must be poor. You must have many karmic obstructions. Practice hard, repent, do prostrations and venerate the Buddha.

My questions about practice continued to plague me. Then, when I was 28, I had the good fortune to meet Master Ling Yuan, a disciple and spiritual descendant of the great modern Master Hsu Yun. Just by chance, we shared a room in a monastery we were both visiting. In the room there was one large platform for sitting and sleeping, and we shared it for the night. I thought, "Ah, maybe this is my chance. Master Ling Yuan is quite renowned. Maybe I can ask him the questions that have been bothering me all these years." At night, Master Ling Yuan was sitting in meditation, so I sat next to him. After some time passed I said to him, "Master, may I ask you a few questions?" and Master Ling Yuan said, "O.K."

I started asking questions, and after each question he would say, "Any more? Any other questions?" This went on for about two hours. I became puzzled and thought to myself, "He keeps asking if I have more questions but he does not answer my questions. What's going on here?" Still, I continued to ask questions. Finally when Master Ling Yuan asked me, "Any more?" I hesitated, and was confused for an instant. Master Ling Yuan pounded on the platform and said, "Take all your questions, just grab them, and put them down." Suddenly my questions were gone. The whole world had changed! My body was running with perspiration, but it felt extraordinarily light. All my questions were laughable. What I had been was laughable.

This was the most important experience in my life up to that time. Afterwards, when I read the Buddhist scriptures or the records of the sayings of the Ch'an Masters, I understood them immediately, without explanation. I felt as if they were my own words. Previously I would wonder, "What does this word mean? What is the point behind that phrase or this expression?" Words are words and that is all. If you understand the idea behind a word, that's fine, but if you don't understand, that's O.K., too. People listen to my talks and ask me questions about practice and life. Some people

understand what I say and some do not. Either way is fine.

The experience I had did not cause all my vexations and afflictions to disappear. I was still aware of them. They were no longer so evident externally, but I knew in my heart that under certain circumstances my problems would manifest. So I felt a strong need to continue to practice. As a result, in 1961, I went into the mountains to begin six years of solitary practice.

I did not concentrate on sitting meditation at first, but spent most of my time performing repentance rituals and prostrations to the Buddha. The ritual for repentance I used is called *Ta-bai T'san* (Great Compassionate Repentance Ceremony), and is based on the *Dharani of the Compassion of Avaloketesvara*. I also prostrated my way through the *Lotus Sutra*, doing one prostration for each character. There are about 80,000 characters in the *Lotus Sutra*, so that was about 80,000 prostrations. I have heard that in Tibetan Buddhism there is a similar practice, but the practitioner does 100,000 prostrations. I guess as far as Tibetan tradition is concerned I lack ten or twenty thousand prostrations.

These practices took up most of my time for about half a year. Then I began to concentrate on sitting meditation. I also did some reading from the sutras and I wrote. Originally, I planned three years in retreat, but they passed so quickly that I decided to stay for three more years.

This may surprise you. For most of us, when we don't have anything to do, time seems to pass slowly, and when we have a lot to do time seems to pass quickly because we are distracted. Meditation is different. When you notice that your legs hurt, time seems to pass extraordinarily slowly. But when you practice well, time seems to pass very quickly, but in this case you're not distracted.

When I came out of retreat, I felt that it was time for me to spread the Dharma. I decided to teach the



Master Sheng-yen as a young monk

Buddhist scriptures, teachings and methods of practice. At that time Buddhist practice was not strong in Taiwan. The standard of practice was not high and Buddhist monks and nuns were not well educated. I was particularly struck by the criticism of a Christian preacher who claimed that Buddhist monks couldn't even read and understand their own scriptures. With this criticism in mind, I decided to go to Japan to study at a Buddhist University. Japan has a strong tradition of Buddhist learning, and I thought I could take what I learned back to Taiwan and try to raise the standard of Buddhist education there.

In Japan I divided my time between studying and practice. I practiced in several different schools of Buddhism, and according to several different styles, including Rinzai and Soto, and at Myoshinji and Harada Roshi's temple.

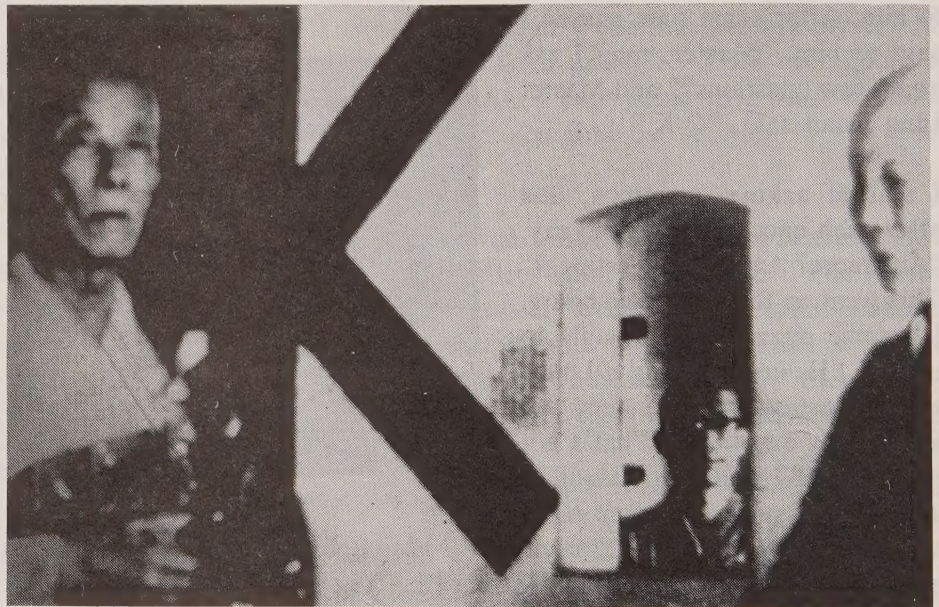
Some people wondered about my real commitment, since I spent so much time on both practice and study. In fact, my studies progressed quickly, and by my sixth year in Japan I had completed my doctoral thesis. This was considered to be extraordinarily rapid progress. When people asked how I was able to finish so quickly I said, "I'm a Buddhist monk. I don't have anything else to do. Everybody else looks for boyfriends or girlfriends or other distractions."

In 1975 I left Japan and returned to Taiwan briefly. Then I was invited to the United States by the American Buddhist Association, and was appointed abbot of the Temple of Great Enlightenment in the Bronx, New York. I didn't know what I might be able to teach people here, and my English was rudimentary, so I stayed in the Temple and waited to see who would show up. Soon people began to come to see me.

I recalled how difficult it was for me to learn how

to practice, and how many years it took. No one had ever talked to me about the stages of development and the methods of practice. I decided that in my own teaching I would emphasize these two approaches. Although Ch'an is not based on words and does not have techniques or stages, the Buddhist scriptures and treatises discuss definite practices and definite stages of practice.

Work hard, work slowly, get results. This was the kind of practice I experienced in the Ch'an monasteries of my youth. There was a conceptual basis



The ceremonial sealing of the hermitage at the beginning of Master Sheng-yen's first three year retreat. Shih-fu is seated inside his retreat cell, looking out.

for this method of practice, even though no one discussed it. It was based on the observation that with slow, hard work, eventually good results appear.

If you ask people today try this sort of "blind, no-practice," practice, which is a slow, deliberate process, they are unlikely to be interested in practicing at all. People in modern societies do not understand such practice, and feel that they are too busy to spend the time this style of teaching requires. In this day and age it is important to teach people about the methods and stages of practice. Then they will have a foundation to work from, and they can benefit from practice.

After I had been in the United States for a while,

I returned to Taiwan for a visit and went to see my two old masters. I had not received transmission before, because I had left my Master to go into retreat and then to Japan. At this point I received transmission in both lineages of Ch'an.

I said to my masters, "I am teaching Ch'an in America. Is that O.K.?" and they responded, "Ha, so think you can teach Ch'an! Is that so?" I answered, "I'm just deceiving people. Don't worry." They said, "Oh, that's O.K., then." After that I started teaching Ch'an in Taiwan, too, deceiving people there, as well.

Do you have any questions? If you don't you had better leave and avoid further deception!

Question: Could you say something about the relationship between the *I Ching* (the Taoist *Book of Changes*) and Ch'an?

Answer: I have never heard of any Ch'an Master at any time who used the *I Ching* or taught that the *I Ching* has anything to do with Ch'an. I, myself, don't teach on the basis of anything. There is really no relationship between the *I Ching* and Ch'an.

If you ask me questions for hours, like I did when I questioned Master Ling Yuan, and then I bang my fist down and say, "Put your questions down!" like he did, do you think you will see your true nature?

If you use what happened to someone else as an example, the story becomes a *kung-an*, a "public case." That is what *kung-an*, or *koan* in Japanese, means. When a *kung-an* happens, it is a living event. After that it is dead, and you cannot follow the outline, the sequence of events, and think that it will precipitate a change in you. Impossible!

Each person has his or her own circumstances, or causes and conditions, and when the causes and conditions mature properly, then something like what happened to me can happen. This does not mean that you can expect causes and conditions to mature by themselves. That is not practice!

It is not unusual for people to read stories about Ch'an Masters and then try to act them out. They

seek the identical outcome. For example, someone might read about the encounter between Ch'an Master Ta-Yu and Lin Chi in the course of which Lin Chi became enlightened, and subsequently try to enact a similar event.

Lin chi was a disciple of Huang-po, who hit him whenever he tried to ask a question. Later Lin-chi studied with Ta-Yu. Ta-Yu said something which made him realize that Huang-po had been kind to him, and he attained enlightenment,

Someone who attended Ch'an retreats had read such stories, and when I hit him with the incense board he grabbed it and tried to hit me back. I grabbed the board and said, "So! You are enlightened." He responded, "You see that I'm enlightened!" and I replied, "You are not enlightened, so don't hit me."

Question: Can one become enlightened through reciting the Buddha's name or through chanting or reciting Buddhist scriptures?

Answer: You can become enlightened through virtually any activity. You can become enlightened by installing your TV or by getting hit. It really depends upon your readiness to become enlightened. According to Ch'an tradition, anything can provide the catalyst, depending upon your ability and maturity. Many Buddhist scriptures describe the merits of reciting the scriptures or reciting the Buddha's name. Many people have used these methods effectively. For example, Master Chi-i of the Tien-tai sect practiced repentance based on the *Lotus Sutra*. He concentrated and recited the *Lotus Sutra*. When he got to the chapter on Medicine King Healing, he became enlightened. Through the practices of recitation and chanting one can also develop chanting samadhi, one of the four kinds of samadhi.

Question: Please explain the stages and methods of Ch'an practice.

Answer: Most people are plagued by deluded and scattered thoughts. The first methods we use in Ch'an practice are intended to make our thoughts less deluded and scattered, and to concentrate the mind. After practicing for a while, counting the

breath, for instance, you should be able to maintain a steady stream of concentration on a thought. When you are able to concentrate well and use your will to control your mind, you can focus your mind on a particular thought, and keep your attention on that thought. Once you can do that, you can progress quickly, and soon your mind will become calm and clear, rather than scattered and deluded.

The next stage is to develop the power of concentration until your mind becomes unified. When your mind is unified there is no separation between body and mind. They are fused or absorbed in a single stream of concentration. You may feel that your body has lost its weight or heaviness, and disappeared. What you really experience is a fully unified and integrated body and mind, and a concentrated mind.

Next, this unified mind will deepen and become more refined until you feel that there is no distinction between inside and outside, or between body and environment. It feels as though the one and the two are absolutely unified in oneness.

Next you begin to see that there is not such a distinct break or division between the thought that you had before and the one that follows. There is a steady single point of concentration, or stream of concentration. A single thought, if you will. If that one thought disappears you experience what the Japanese call "kensho," or seeing one's true nature. When the one thought, the unified mind, disappears, the self attachment which perpetuates the one thought, or is behind it the unified mind, disappears.

This last stage, the exploding and disappearance of the single, concentrated stream of self into no-thought or no-self, is not only the aim of Ch'an, it is the method and practice of Ch'an as well.

Question: After you went through your experience with Master Lin Yuan, and the world suddenly changed for you, did you still have vexations and afflictions? Did you finally solve your problems?

Answer: Traditionally, Buddhism says that there are several ways to look at vexations. One is to see that there are vexations connected with views and

vexations connected with cultivation. Therefore there are vexations which are removed by correct views and vexations which are removed by cultivation. The vexations associated with cultivation are more basic, root vexations or afflictions. Up-rooting the vexations of cultivation doesn't occur until the first stage, or *bhumi*, of Bodhisattvahood, a fairly deep level of development.

What happened to me removed the vexations caused by view. It radically changed my world and my perspective on things, but my root vexations remained and still needed to be uprooted through cultivation. After you see your true nature, when afflictions occur they can still cause vexations. But you are clearly aware of them and recognize them as vexations.

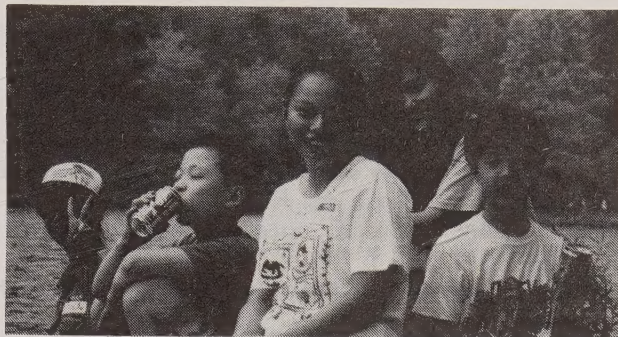
Be clear about this. Do not imagine that a little bit of enlightenment will cause all your afflictions and vexations to vanish. That is not the case. If a Ch'an Master claims that all of his problems and afflictions are gone, don't believe him. I am still an ordinary person and I still need to practice regularly. In fact, I have never seen evidence that any Ch'an Patriarch or Master ever claimed that he had no more problems or that he had become a Buddha.

One begins to remove root vexations by the first stage of Bodhisattvahood. At the point of Buddhahood, they're completely gone. This is the highest level of accomplishment. A first experience of Ch'an enlightenment, or seeing one's true nature, involves removing deluded views, and the vexations caused by view. All your vexations do not disappear, but because you have glimpsed your true nature your faith becomes extremely strong. It is based on firm foundation.

Very accomplished Ch'an Masters, who have experienced very thorough and deep enlightenment, may no longer need to follow the strictly defined rules of discipline. For instance, they may no longer need to sit in meditation. But they continue an internalized process of observing their own minds and thoughts very carefully.

News and Upcoming Events:

About one hundred and twenty people attended the annual Ch'an Center Outing, which was at Bear Mountain this year. Activities included games, and a martial arts demonstration. Ken Lo performed Bodhidharma's Longevity Exercise, and he and David Berman demonstrated sword exercises.



Outing participants enjoying Bear Mountain

On Oct. 10 Guo-gu Shih will speak on "Transforming Suffering" at the invitation of the International Buddhist Council of N.Y. The talk will be from 7:30 to 9:30 P.M. in the Red Room, St. Paul's Chapel (lower level). (#1 or #9 subway or M104 bus to 116th St. and Broadway)

A Dharma Gathering will take place on Friday, Oct. 27 from 6:00 to 9:30 P.M. Master Sheng-yen will discuss "Buddhist Ethics in Everyday Life." Everyone is welcome. Please RSVP

Master Sheng-yen will give a special public lecture on Sunday, Oct. 29, from 1:30 to 3:00 P.M.

On November 6th and 7th, from 7:00 to 9:00 P.M., Master Sheng-yen lecture at the Taipei Theater, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, N.Y., N.Y. This Program is cosponsored by the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture, the Chinese Information and Cultural Center, Dr. Kenneth G. Zysk, Director of the New York University Department of Near Eastern Languages and Literatures and Dr. Grace Fung of the New York Multicultural Resource Center at Hunter College. Master Sheng-yen will speak on "Zen and Mental Health" on the 6th, and on "Zen and Environmental Protection" the next night.

The Beginners' Meditation Workshop, a four-hour long introduction to Ch'an practice, will be given on Saturdays, Sept. 30 and Oct. 28, from 9:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. in English, and from 2:00 to 6:00 P.M. in Chinese. Please call to register.

There will be One-day Ch'an Retreats on Oct. 7 and Nov. 4. Please call to register.

On Oct. 14 there will be a day of Recitation of Buddha's Name, from 9:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M.

The Friday Night Ch'an Sitting Group, under Master Sheng-yen's direction, will resume after his return in Oct. This is an opportunity for group practice and guidance from Shih-fu. There is also a short talk by Shih-fu each night. Please call for further information.

The Special Wednesday Ch'an Class will also resume when Master Sheng-yen returns. Shih-fu will continue to comment on the letters of Master Ta-hui Tsung-kao (1088-1163) Ta-hui revived the Lin-Chi (Jp. Rinzai) school of Ch'an, and encouraged the use of hua-tou in meditation. Many of his letters were written to lay student, and address the concerns of householders. Please call for more information.

Please send us your comments about our publication. Are there aspects of Buddhism or daily life which we have not addressed yet, or other ways we could be helpful? What are the issues you feel are important to American Buddhism? Do you have questions about your own practice?

Ongoing Activities, except during retreats:

Recitation Group: Mon. evenings from 7:30 to 9:00 P.M. Amitabha Buddha recitation in Chinese, and prostrations.

Group Meditation: Tues. and Thurs. evenings from 7:30 to 9:00 P.M.

Ch'an Sitting Group: Fri. 7:00 P.M. to 9:00 P.M., with a social half hour until 9:30. An evening of sitting and walking meditation, with a short talk on the application of Ch'an to daily life or the concepts and methods of Ch'an. This is also an opportunity to ask Master Sheng-yen or one of the resident monks for guidance in practice. Please call for details.

Sunday Program: Meditation, chanting, vegetarian lunch, afternoon talk and afternoon meditation. 10:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M.

First Saturday of each month: One day Ch'an retreat, 9:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M. Please call for details and to register.

Last Saturday of each month: Beginners' Meditation Workshop. In English: 9:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. In Chinese 2:00 to 6:00. Please call for details and to register.

Dharma Day for Young Adults

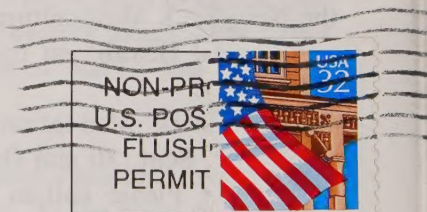
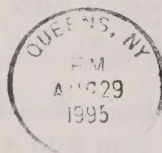
Saturday, Sept. 16

for people from age 19 to 29

"Finding a Direction in Life and a Personal Standpoint."

Please call the Center to preregister

Ch'an Meditation Center
Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture
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